

The wild part of wildlife

by Todd Eskelin

It's a boy; no, it's a girl. Wait, it looks like three boys and five girls. Ah... A very cool and late spring has led to yet another year of baby birds bouncing off windows, sitting in the driveway, and basically acting like the bunch of 4-week-olds that they are. Believe it or not, it only takes most songbirds about four weeks from the time they hatch until they are out of the nest in search of knowledge and food. They don't yet know how to feed themselves, and it is often several days to a week before they can fly, but they are still mobile and can raise quite a ruckus.

If you are a hawk or other predator that likes birds, this is the easiest time to hunt. The proud songbird parents are off gathering pounds of caterpillars and other soft-bodied delicacies, and eight little babies are screaming at the top of their lungs to be fed.

I have been watching a junco family at my house as the young stand on a pile of seeds and then squawk until dad picks up a seed from under their feet and places it into a mouth. These squawkings are not exactly the sponge my little daughter has turned out to be, but they are learning nonetheless.

Songbird populations can accept a certain amount of loss. That is why the parents produce four to eight eggs. At least 50% of the eggs will never make it through the first year of life. Birds basically produce at least double so that as young get picked off each summer, there will still be enough survivors to carry the species for future years.

That's where we humans enter the picture. We often believe that we are doing baby birds a service when we "rescue" them from the driveway. We all want to do a good deed and what better way to show our kids a good example than by rescuing a baby bird from certain peril when its irresponsible parents have abandoned the helpless infant?

This scenario could not be further from the truth. There is no substitute for parental love and care for the offspring. While techniques of raising infant birds have improved, the likelihood that they will make it back into the wild and breed as normal birds is extremely low.

Another common myth is that baby birds have

been abandoned. The parents are likely off gathering food and as long as you are near by, they will rarely bring food all the way to the young for fear that you will see where the fledglings are hiding in the bushes.

I once was called out to a house where a family of baby robins had been "abandoned" in the back yard. The kids had set up a station a short distance away and were vigilantly watching the two young robins, so that when I arrived I would be able to go right to them and rescue them.

Upon arrival it was clear that the babies had not been abandoned, but they were very hungry. Mom and dad were perched a short distance away, hiding in a spruce tree. Each had a mouthful of green caterpillars and was waiting for the coast to clear so they could feed their hungry young. It was hard, but necessary to explain to the kids that they were actually keeping the babies from being fed and that I was not going to capture and rescue them.

There is no blame, just an understanding that my generation grew up with "Roadrunner" and "Daffy Duck," while this generation watches "Animal Rescue" and "The Jeff Corwin Experience." Don't get me wrong; I like watching the shows myself and there is nothing wrong with these shows. They are a great educational tool, but we must guard against kids who watch these shows and have an immediate desire to handle and rescue wild critters that don't need rescuing. Who hears the "Don't do this at home" warnings, when there are baby tigers on the screen?

So, the next time you see baby birds wandering around your yard, rest assured the parents are likely nearby, waiting to return with some food. Disturbing the babies will only delay the arrival of their meal ticket. Please resist pleas from your kids to save the baby birds, and teach the kids to stay way back and enjoy watching the parents bringing food to their young.

Todd Eskelin is a Biological Technician at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge. He specializes in birds and has conducted research on songbirds in many areas of the state. Previous Refuge Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed on the Web at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.